

RECORDS OF THE TRAGICAL AWARENESS OF LIFE

Imre GARACZI

The long 19th. century is the century of the "feelings of life". This feeling seems to appear in a harmonized way in the different dimensions of European culture: this century does not seem to come to an end. That is why, perhaps, this great awaiting of "the turn of the century" towards the approaching new millennium is so characteristic.

The 19th century expected excessive promises from its progeny, and because of that expectation "the turn of the century" dressed itself up with a psychologically frustrated dimension: fulfillment and realization became very much doubtful, and the fate of metaphysics became also uncertain. Positivism and the technologically-oriented science had promised a new apotheosis, but the references of the existential world, instead, assumed an escathological mood. The sense of universality of the rational morale breaks up, disintegrates, and gets trampled into the dust; the mosaic fragments of the value mass get spattered around. Europe, like a powerful geomorphological corpse, is seriously sick. This sense of ailment draws attention to MAN. Is man more than we have previously believed? He is puzzled by realizing the significance of irrationalism: man can get closer to nature through it, rather than through his conscious ego. Nietzsche and Dostoevsky unveil the reality of man's 'subterranean inclination to wrongdoing', the type 'who consciously goes mad to get rid of his sobriety in order to have the last word.'

The circumgyration of empiricism is replaced by an – overstepping the reason – intuitive way of life, which, in a Freudian manner, sets up new intellectual horizons. To see whether the self-conscious reflects reality: 'Aren't we at the threshold of a new age, which we should, primarily, call a negative age 'beyond morale?' – says Nietzsche. M. de Unamuno's thoughts – being confronted with the Spanish reality – raise the issue of the retreating traditional moral value-judgment system, the retreat from man and the increasing objectivization of man's visionary attitude. Behind

Unamuno's Christian-typology and quixotry we can discover the nietzscheian intention-morale criticism dressed up in the Panzaian grotesque.

The taboo-systems of the exhausted and hypocritical society become 'pseudo-values; ethics gets placed on the descending slopes of decay. Don Quixote and his servant wander like parodistic reflections. The need requires a Faustian milieu. 'Give my soul back! Look, this is Dr. Faustus's cry when kissing Helen he departs into eternal damnation.' – thus cried out Unanumo! Can the cause of some deed, if it cannot be found in the intention but it lies hidden in the liberated force of some self-conscious, be free from determinism? What kind of judgment can we exercise over it?

The mixed mass of questions of responsibility and irresponsibility emerges. Can we extend our irresponsibility over our actions – or even over just a portion of them –, which we permit for the wretched, the sick and the insane. This quixotry that took responsibility triggers a series of events that are irresponsible and alien to the epoch.

In the 19th century the traditional values were dissected primarily by three canonized prophets – Marx, Nietzsche and Freud –, and they drew an anatomically precise sketch of the Apocalypse: Marxism, which wants to transform power into the absolute good; the madness of the saints submerged in the Nietzscheian desire-complex; and the suppression of the Oedipusian desire lying hidden behind the pristine, immaculate look. All three are responsible for letting the genie out of the bottle. And these genii participating in St. Vitus' dance sweep through the Old Continent. The value domains of the long 19th. century, which were made examples to be followed by Hobbes, Hume, Kant and the Parisian parlors of the ancien regime, degraded into sagging, dust-covered marionette puppets. This unpleasant and tragicomical awareness of life became something to be ashamed of, to be hidden and to be negated. Negation can very easily coax the devil, the Anti-Christ and the alter-egos – spontaneously erupting out of the sub-conscious – to come out. The prospects of science and objectivization allow to take a glimpse at the door that offers escape into a seductive vision of future. The challenged value ideals are projected with new corpses of values, which may replace the breathless Christianity and the creeds of a depressed rationalism. The former glory, the bygone golden age, the glamour of the colonies, Castilian Isabelle, Charles V, the reconquist, the Spanish Low Countries are all just jugglers in the theater of memory. The present of the turn of the century evokes the destruction of Babylon and Nineveh. The living-world of a civilization is as fragile as life itself. Emotion, thought and common-sense all become paradoxical.

Both the spiritual-psychological Persepolis and the materialistic Susa get destroyed. The backbone of Europe is cracking into decay. Nor can the Hispanic Peninsula recognize itself or its past, self-conscious glory.. From the depth of the orphic well it regurgitates the forgotten prayers, the picaresque of the Don and Sancho, which is worth while to be re-written. The all-creative Unamuno – the most exciting and the most complex figure of the '98 generation – looking around embraces the alpha-point of the modern age; he gets engaged in a dialogue with

Cervantes. He does not fight to reach the summit; he easily springs towards it. He makes Cervantes an actor, a partner in their dialogue, as Plato did it with Socrates. This voice reverberates from the exchange of ideas between Don Quixote and Vivaldo: "Well, my dear Don Quixote, step closer and whisper quietly into my ear the truth of your heart; and later, when glory had taken you under her wings, deep, down in your soul, didn't you long for the unconfessed love of your mature manhood? Wouldn't you have given up everything, all glory, for just one, single sweet look from Aldonza Lorenzo?"¹

Unamuno's poetic soul emanates the hidden anguish, the ambition to play a godly role, to play this role as the most authentic record of the age. Here, the role is permanent, it was already written a long time ago; it is only the characters that change. Alas! It is not even important if we run out of the actors. The role continues to live on; that is why it is full of life. "Tell me, my dear Don Quixote, since we are alone, tell me: isn't it possible that the unwavering audacity you show in your heroic deeds is nothing else but that amorous desire coming forcefully to light, which you did not dare to confess to Aldonza Lorenzo? Isn't it possible that you are brave only in the eyes of others exactly because you were such a coward in the presence of your aim of desires? That is why the desire of survival has flared in you up instigated by your innermost core, so that your seed should beget a descendant here on earth; the meaning of your life, similarly to the lives of other men in life, is to transform life into an eternal one. And since you could not conquer your own self sacrificing your life for being lost in love, you have longed for keeping your life in the eternal memory of nations. Well, I would have you know noble knight that the desire for immortality is nothing but the flower of desire after progenies."

Unamuno descends into the modern world's inferno; holding Don's and Sancho's hands, he roams over and between the different qualities of intellectual bundles. Out of the bursts of flame of this Hispanic Valpurgis-like night, in a morbid and self-castigating manner, emerges the mirror image of the European tradition. The picture is not coherent, it rather looks like a broken mirror; the small fragments individually reflect the past's big picture: the ideas, the dogmas and the philosophical systems. The eccentric paradoxes of quixotry provide refuge and solace. This is the inventory room of memories, a foul-smelling wax works; and the sun brilliantly shines into the man's eyes who takes a deep breath and sighs heavily when he leaves this place behind him. Living through the experience of a spiritual crisis is always deceptive, since pretense takes its form naturally; and because of that it is difficult to define the range and level of crisis. The visionary man, who perceives the trinity of past, present, and future as the progenies of an absolute present, cannot know which ideas, thoughts – believed to be fixed –, are in the debit entries of the future. The hope remains, however, this is nothing else but the distrust of the existing against the far-sightedness of the spirit.

Unamuno continues to exhibit the Cervantesian tradition, but it represents nothing more than the dawn of idols wrapped in the ambiance of a merry feast. A plethora of superannuated prejudices converse here, which were equally important in the past, like superstition or ritual were. The West is chanting about its end – it has been doing it for over a century –, and, perhaps, that is why it is going to survive for another one hundred years. Spain is a part of the West, it was – one time – an extremely important protagonist of it. Now, the '98 generation would like to morally substantiate the decay and the decline. This is the intonation pattern of the break-away semi-periphery. It looks the same like the Russians on the other side, Solovjov, Bergayev Kropotkin, Sestov; almost the whole silver-age generation resounds for the intellect; from the East the WEST shines through like an idea. At last, after World War I, the semi-peripheries meet in Paris, London and Berlin to conclude in amazement that this crying-rejoicing Unamunoistic awareness of life may become an important prerequisite of a way of life. "Because Helen robs our soul with her kisses. And what we long for and need is the soul, a soul rich in content."

At the end of the century, and this is especially perceptible from the 1920's on, the Cartesian-metaphysical world concept of the WEST begins to disintegrate. This is the process what the members of the Spanish '98 cultural delegation discern, and they attempt to redefine and to reinterpret the maltreated authority of modernity.

Unamuno's attempt is manifested in his uniquely interesting work, 'The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.' The source is Cervantes's story about the Knight of the Rueful Countenance, which, Unamuno, by attaching his own comments and notes to it, rewrites and reinterprets. By this method the author creates such a peculiar framework, in which both the wave-crests and wave-troughs of modernity can be interpreted. Let's not forget Cervantes is the product of the dawning modern age, and, parallel with him, the rational world concept of Galileo, G. Bruno, Descartes and Newton becomes meaningful. This dichotomy represents an anti-tonic approach; as if Unamuno attempted to make us perceive that rationality and irrationality function as modernity's "dualist veracity" with the stipulation that they are naturally pre-conditioned and that they often cross each other's paths. This process is the '98 generation's method, the dramaturgical formulation of the "philosophy of life" in its broad sense. Unamuno uses two supporting pillars: on the one hand, he searches for the milieu of the enlightened reason dethroned by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, on the other hand, he adds relish to all that using the decorative elements of the late Romanticism. The sight of the submerged existence hurts his eyes; quixotry did appear exactly in this manner in Cervantes's time. Unamuno gives preference to intuition, the direct way of looking at things and to empathy. At the same time, he holds up a subjective mirror towards the apotheosis of the objective reality, which is so characteristic of the philosophies, and that is independent of the mentality.

He seeks for the contemplative man, who, primarily, is not an adherent of practical actions, because this individual considers the execution of his acts as automatic and instinctive. This could also be interpreted as a sort of morale criticism, as nothing else happens here but the events of the living world converse with the socially accepted conditionings. The possibility of an utopian sketch being drawn up of the open morale takes the stage now, which is not comprised of pre-conditioned noddings or automatically used models, but it represents a personal, creative quality. Here instinct and reason participate in a modern "dans macabre", and the Kantian model of employing reason and mind often mingles with them.

Unamuno seems to be following Bergson's mode of "élan vital" and thus he is able to relive the stories of Cervantes, but he relives them as the "story-telling functions" of the XXth. century reason.² Divergent historical dimensions are intertwined in Unamuno's logic, and he tries to find an explanation as to why the frustrated world order at the end of the century very often suggests the legality of unorganic solutions to replace the customary Cartesian conditioning. This is what he makes perceptible in the 50th chapter of his book, where Don Quixote is debating with a prebend about the truth content of the romances.³

"Aren't romances true? Read them and you'll see how much enjoyment they provide!" – refuted Don Quixote jubilantly. "My dear God, how cannot this prebend understand the irresistible force of this argument, when he considers so many things to be true, truer than those things that we can perceive through our own senses..."⁴

Here Unamuno goes to war against historic relativism. The absolute view of historicity – pro forma – fixes the world of values. Against the necessities of the epoch it becomes uncertain. Nietzsche, twenty years earlier in his "Joyful Wisdom", turned against exactly the overweight of the accumulated historic materials.

And the Spanish noble continues: "I know about my self since I have become a knight-errant; I have also become brave, polite, generous, erudite, noble-minded, bald, gentle, patient, energetic..."⁵ Unamuno uses the text of Cervantes to reflect on his own age, where the text obtains a peculiar meaning: the irrational attitude, the manner of solutions beyond the paradigm amplify the rational modes of existence. Meanwhile, history is in motion, the living world keeps on functioning on different horizons. This is the understanding of life and history. As he considers reality's processes as life itself; this understanding can only be interpreted as a motion lasting from life to life, and our fortitude plays a crucial role in it. This is an existentialist philosophy; it attempts to place the human modes of existence into the centre. This is not the same with the philosophy of life, because it doesn't measure man through the model of matter. Man cannot be conceptualized through material categories.

Intense dynamism characterizes Unamuno's quixotry, it doesn't consider existence to be permanent; it connects existence to temporality. Man never appears as a separated entity, since he is always connected to his existing surroundings. The definition and effect of experience remain to be pivotal for him.⁶

This experience is always excessive and is mostly needed to raise the big issues. This is how Unamuno tries – in the first decade of the XXth. century before the great cataclysms – to warn the educated Europe that metaphysics is dead, but its memory, its past and its traditions continue to be used and they continue to live on in the erudite man who considers these Western values to be his own. The pivotal intellectual turning point of the XXth. century is set in motion: reality and the parody of reality are hopelessly mixed together.

Bibliography

¹ Miguel de Unamuno: *The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza*, 1998, Europa Publishing House

² Henry Bergson's (1859 – 1941), a French philosopher, central category that means, first of all vitality, becoming of something, and "existing."

³ The creation of fantasies, fairy tales that connect man with life and the separate individuals.

⁴ Unamuno. *Ibid.* p. 174.

⁵ Unamuno. *Ibid.* p. 174.

⁶ Existentialists often gain their experiences through concrete experiences and are very often inspired by them. At Jaspers this experience refers to "border situations," Sartre used "disgust", see his novel titled "The Disgust", whereas the same appears in Gabriel Marcel as religious "life feelings."